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ABSTRACT

After a brief historical review of the development of basic reading materials and controlled vocabularies, a study to determine the percentage of Dolch words in four recently published basal reader programs is reported. The percentages provided help in determining whether the Dolch list is still viable. Results revealed that words on the Dolch list accounted for more than 50% of the words in every book assessed. It was concluded that recently published basic readers include approximately the same percentage of Dolch words as basic readers in use four decades ago. (Author)

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Basic Readers and Basic Words

Jerry L. Johns

When did the first American series of basic readers enter the educational scene? When did the word method come into vogue? When and how did controls in vocabulary develop? How does the Dolch basic sight vocabulary, after forty years, fare in recently published basic reading materials? These are some of the questions toward which this study is focused.

Historical Developments

It is generally believed that Noah Webster "...produced the first set of readers written by an American author" (Smith, 1965, p. 44). His readers emerged from a single book (Grammatical Institute) that was made up of three sections. Each section was printed separately in 1790 and thus became "... the first set of consecutive readers in the history of American reading instruction" (Smith, 1965, p. 45).

In the years that followed, many sets of readers began to appear. The readers prepared by Lyman Cobb, Geroge Hillard, and Samuel Worcester were less well-known than the famous McGuffy readers; however, Worcester is credited as "...the first American author to advocate the word method" (Smith, 1965, p. 65). The word method was in opposition to the ABC method for teaching reading. Students taught with the ABC method were drilled on the letters of the alphabet for months. The word method focused beginning reading instruction on familiar and easy words instead of the alphabet.

Words, of course, have always formed the core of reading materials. In the 1920's the vocabulary of basic readers became a topic of concern and interest. By the 1930's, the number of new words introduced to students

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in beginning reading materials was considerably reduced. The writers of these reading materials checked their primary reader vocabularies against studies by Thorndike (1921), Packer (1921), and Gates (1926). The Gates list was widely used and had considerable influence on the vocabulary used in basic readers for the primary grades.

When Dolch developed his now famous list of basic sight words in 1936, he used words common to three word lists—one of which was the list by Gates. Dolch claimed that his basic sight vocabulary of 220 words accounted for over 50 percent of the words in basic reading materials; furthermore, he provided data to support his view. Johns (1971), using five basic reading series that were published in the middle 1960's validated Dolch's (1941) earlier results. But what about the percentage of Dolch words in basic reading materials published in the early 1970's? Vocabulary control, so common in earlier decades, is gradually diminishing and the new basic readers lack a tightly controlled vocabulary. In fact, there now appears to be a trend toward richer and more varied vocabularies in recently published basic reading materials.

Purpose of Study

In an effort to determine whether the Dolch list continues to reflect the majority of the words in basic readers, a study was undertaken to calculate the percentage of Dolch words in four basic reader programs published since 1970. Such a study would make it possible to decide whether the Dolch list is still viable for recently published basic reader programs.

Procedure

For this investigation, a group of students in a professional education course in the teaching of reading checked the vocabularies of four basic reading series against the Dolch list.

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In the pre-primers and primers, all pages in each book were checked for Dolch words. Each time a Dolch word appeared in a book, it was marked on a prepared sheet which contained an alphabetical list of all 220 Dolch words. To determine the percentage of Dolch words in the pre-primers and primers, the total frequency of Dolch words was divided by the total number of words in the books.

To determine the percentage of Dolch words found in the first through sixth readers, a slightly different procedure was used. Ten 100-word samples were chosen at random from each book. Each time a Dolch word appeared in the selections for a particular book, it was marked on a prepared sheet which contained an alphabetical list of all 220 Dolch words. To determine the percentage of Dolch words for each book level, the total frequency of Dolch words for that particular sample was divided by the total number of words (in each case 1000) for that particular book level. Inflected forms of the basic sight words were counted, just as Dolch did in his original investigation.

Using the procedure described above, the percentage of Dolch words in each book was calculated. The major question that prompted this investigation was whether or not the Dolch list of 220 basic sight words still comprises 50 to 70 per cent of the words in basic reading series published in the last few years. Table 1 contains the various percentages of Dolch words for each reader level assessed in the manner described above.

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Table 1
Percentage of Dolch Basic Sight Words
Found in Four Series of Basic Readers

Basic Reading Series	Reader Levels											
	PP-1	PP-2	PP-3	P	1	2-1	2-2	3-1	3-2	4	5	6
Harcourt Brace	58	60	62	74	68	68	64	65	59	55	57	53
Houghton Mifflin	68	76	65	65	62	63	63	58	63	56	59	60
Lyons and Carnahan	74	70	*	69	69	63	63	58	60	55	63	51
Scott Foresman	*	*	*	65	62	67	65	58	62	58	54	*

*not assessed in this study

From the figures in this table, it can be noted that the Dolch list still accounts for over 50 percent of the words in every book assessed, regardless of the particular basic reading series. The consistent inclusion of these basic sight words over the years can be seen when the results of this investigation are compared to Dolch's original findings. The data presented in Table 2 show that the two investigations are generally in close agreement. The table shows a high percentage of Dolch words for basic readers in grade one and a gradual decrease through the remaining grades.

Table 2
A Comparison of the Percentage of Dolch Basic Sight Words
in the Present Investigation with Dolch's Original Findings

Investigator	Number of Reading Series	Reader Levels					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Dolch	4	70	66	65	61	59	59
Johns	4	65	65	61	56	58	55*

*This percentage is based on only three basic reading series.

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Discussion and Conclusions

It seems as though the Dolch list has withstood the test of time. These words continue to occur frequently in the basic reading materials examined in this study. It would appear that the trend away from highly controlled vocabularies has allowed publishers to create more interesting reading materials and still provide ample attention to basic sight words. This study has shown that new basic reading materials give adequate exposure to the Dolch words--at least as adequate as the coverage given forty years ago. Also, there appears to be little reason to suspect that the words used in the most recent revisions of basic readers would produce results that noticeably depart from the findings reported in this investigation.

Perhaps it is time to devote more time and energy to teaching reading in a meaningful context and less time to helping students master a particular list of basic sight words. The evidence seems to suggest that the basic sight words were, are, and will continue to be essential components of modern reading systems--even if a list of word frequencies is not included in the back of the book.

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